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ABSTRACT

This brief examines racial/ethnic differences in educational attainment, tracking student progress from high school to a postsecondary credential and examining where in this path racial/ethnic differences arise. It uses data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, "Fourth Follow-up, 2000, which tracks students who were in 8th grade in 1988 and were 8 years beyond their expected high school graduation in 2000. The brief first examines three milestones that are traditional indicators of student progress: on-time attainment of a regular high school diploma, enrollment in a postsecondary institution within a year following high school graduation, and attainment of a postsecondary credential within the scheduled time frame. Overall, 23 percent of all Asians who were in eighth grade in 1988 completed a postsecondary credential through the traditional path, compared to 15 percent of all whites, 4 percent of all blacks, and 4 percent of all Hispanics. The brief also examines student progress through high school and postsecondary education as of 2000 to show how the flexibility within the U.S. educational system affects progress. Results suggest that nontraditional paths do seem to help reduce or eliminate some racial/ethnic attainment differences. (SM)

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Issue Brief

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July 2003

Racial/Ethnic Differences in the Path to a Postsecondary Credential

Educational achievement and attainment are often of central importance to education policymakers because of their relationship to economic outcomes. Racial/ethnic equity in these education measures is often of particular interest. Jacobson et al. (2001), for example, summarized differences in educational achievement and attainment between Black and White students,[1] as well as the relationship between achievement and attainment differences (e.g., educational achievement was found to mitigate race differences in college completion).[2]

This Issue Brief focuses on racial/ethnic differences in educational attainment. These differences are well documented, with Blacks and Hispanics typically having lower attainment rates than Whites, and Asians having a higher rate than other groups.[3] These racial/ethnic differences represent the culmination of differences at various progression points in the education pipeline. For example, students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds have different likelihoods of graduating from high school and attending college, with Blacks and Hispanics typically having lower rates of educational progress (as measured by these indicators) than their White counterparts, and Asians having a higher rate of progress (at least for college attendance).[4]

This Issue Brief tracks student progress along the path from high school to a postsecondary credential, examining where in this path racial/ethnic differences arise. Specifically, this Issue Brief uses data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, "Fourth Follow-up, 2000" (NELS:88/2000) to examine various education milestones along the path to a postsecondary credential. This NELS:88/2000 survey tracks students who were in the eighth grade in 1988, and who were thus 8 years beyond their expected (1992) high school graduation in 2000.

The Issue Brief first examines three milestones that are traditional indicators of student progress—the on-time attainment of a regular high school diploma;[5] enrollment in a postsecondary institution within the year following high school graduation (hereafter referred to as immediate enrollment); and attainment of a postsecondary credential within the "scheduled" time frame[6] (i.e., within 4 years of enrollment for a bachelor's degree, 2 years for an associate degree, and 1 year for a postsecondary certificate). Although this "on-time" schedule might be indicative of a traditional postsecondary path, few students follow it. For example, among NELS:88/2000 students, only 12 percent attained a postsecondary credential through this path.[7]

The traditional path is not the only route to obtaining a postsecondary credential. The American education system is relatively flexible, providing numerous opportunities for adults to further their education at later stages of their lives (e.g., high school equivalency programs such as the GED, open enrollments at community colleges, college programs for working adults). In fact, as of 2000, 15 percent of the NELS:88/2000 students who completed high school had done so through an alternate means, 30 percent of those who enrolled in a postsecondary institution had delayed their entry, and 59 percent of those who obtained a postsecondary credential had done so over an extended period (beyond the scheduled time frame). The second part of this Issue Brief examines student progress through high school and postsecondary education as of 2000 to show how this flexibility within the education system affects progress.

Racial/Ethnic Differences in Meeting Traditional Milestones

Figure 1 shows the progress of NELS:88/2000 students through each traditional education milestone. This figure shows the percentage of students of each racial/ethnic group who met each milestone, *given that* they had met the previous milestone(s). Racial/ethnic differences emerged at the first milestone, the receipt of a regular on-time high school diploma. Asian students were more likely than White, Black, and Hispanic students to receive a regular on-time diploma, with 91 percent doing so. White students also were more likely than Black and Hispanic students to receive a regular on-time diploma, with 82 percent of White students doing so compared to 72 percent of Black students and 67 percent of Hispanic students. When these on-time high school graduates reached the next milestone—immediate entry to a postsecondary institution—similar (but not identical) patterns emerged. Asian students who graduated from high school with a regular on-time diploma were more likely than White, Black, and Hispanic students to immediately enroll in a postsecondary institution. White students were more likely to do so than their Black counterparts, but no differences were detected in the rates of immediate enrollment between White and Hispanic students.

Finally, at the third milestone, Black and Hispanic students who had graduated on time and immediately enrolled in a postsecondary institution were again found to have lower attainment rates than their Asian and White peers. Although

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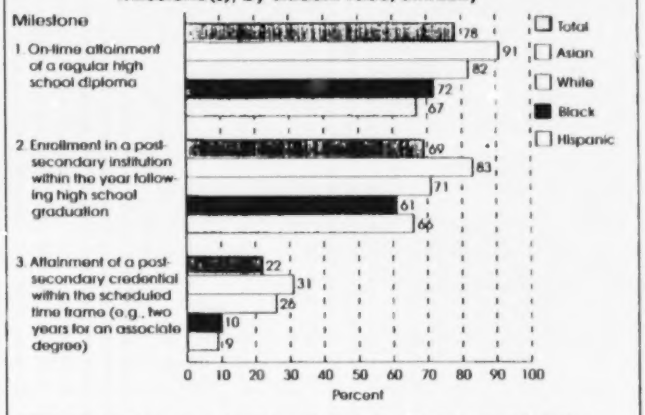
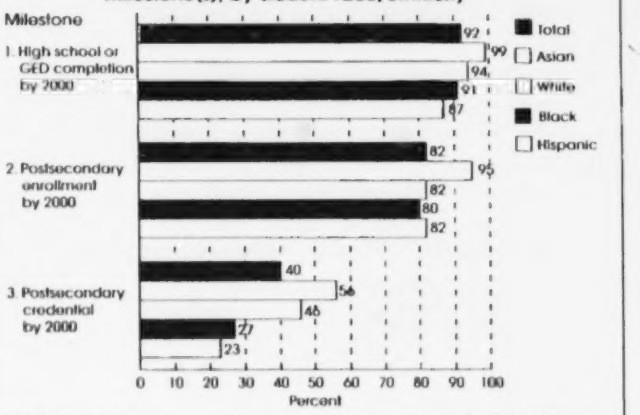
Figure 1. Percentage of 1988 eighth-graders meeting each traditional milestone, of those who met the previous milestone(s), by student race/ethnicity



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, "Fourth Follow-up" (NELS:88/2000).

Figure 2. Percentage of 1988 eighth-graders meeting each less stringent milestone(s), of those who met the previous milestone(s), by student race/ethnicity



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, "Fourth Follow-up 2000" (NELS:88/2000).

about one-quarter of both Asian and White students who had received a regular on-time high school diploma and had immediately enrolled in a postsecondary institution obtained an on-time credential, no more than 10 percent of their Black or Hispanic peers did so. The net result of these differences in progress is that 23 percent of *all* Asian students who were in the eighth grade in 1988 completed a postsecondary credential through the traditional path, compared to 15 percent of all White students, 4 percent of all Black students, and 4 percent of all Hispanic students.[8]

Racial/Ethnic Differences in Attainment as of 2000

To examine progress regardless of the route taken, figure 2 shows the percentage of students who met three less stringent milestones—completing high school, enrolling in a postsecondary institution, or obtaining a postsecondary credential by the year 2000—given that they had met each previous milestone(s). The first milestone allows the completion of high school through alternative means such as the GED; allowing this second-chance route to high school completion (along with more time) results in a significantly greater high school completion rate among each group of students. Asian students, however, still had a higher completion rate than other students, and White students had a higher completion rate than Hispanic students (although there were no longer detectable differences between White and Black students). At the second milestone, more students in each racial/ethnic group who completed high school enrolled in a postsecondary institution by 2000 than had enrolled immediately after high school; although Asian students still had higher enrollment rates than the three other student groups, the enrollment rate for Whites was not significantly higher than for Blacks or Hispanics. Finally, at the third milestone, obtaining a postsecondary credential, completion rates again were higher among each group of postsecondary entrants, but the differences for Asians and Whites versus Blacks and Hispanics remained.

Further, although the gaps in high school completion rates between Asians and their Black and Hispanic peers and between Whites and Hispanics were not eliminated, they were reduced when "nontraditional" completion was allowed in addition to on-time graduation with a regular diploma. Thus, nontraditional paths do seem to help reduce or eliminate at least some racial/ethnic attainment differences.

These findings also suggest that one issue for Black and Hispanic students, compared to White students, is persistence through high school and postsecondary education. As discussed above, Whites were more likely than Hispanics to graduate from high school by 2000, and among those who graduated from high school and enrolled in postsecondary education by 2000, Whites were more likely than Blacks and Hispanics to obtain a postsecondary credential by 2000. In addition, Whites were more likely than Blacks and Hispanics to graduate from high school on time, and even among those who graduated on time and immediately enrolled in college, Whites were more likely than Blacks and Hispanics to obtain an on-time postsecondary credential.

Finally, flexibility within the education system increases the proportion of all racial/ethnic groups who meet these education milestones, and in some cases, seems to reduce differences in attainment. This attenuation of attainment differences reflects the fact that among those who met each milestone, Blacks and Hispanics often were more likely to meet the milestone via a nontraditional means than were Asians and Whites (figure 3).[9] Attainment differences could be further attenuated over a longer time frame, which would provide more opportunity for meeting the milestones via a nontraditional path.

Footnotes

[1]Throughout this Issue Brief, the terms Black and White are used as shorthand for non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic White, respectively. Asian is used as shorthand for Asian or Pacific Islander.

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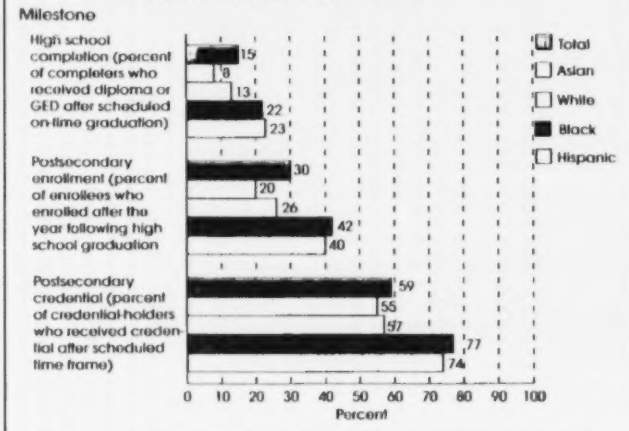
Figure 3. Percentage of 1988 eighth-graders reaching each milestone by 2000 who did so via nontraditional means, by student race/ethnicity



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, "Fourth Follow-up" (NELS:88/2000)

[2]Socioeconomic status is also related to race/ethnicity and may mitigate attainment differences among racial/ethnic groups (see e.g., Jacobson et al. 2001).

[3]U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, March Current Population Surveys (data tabulated in U.S. Department of Education 2002, 80–81); Ingels et al. 2002.

[4]U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, October Current Population Surveys (data tabulated in U.S. Department of Education 2002, 73); Sanderson et al. 1996; Jacobson et al. 2001.

[5]In this context, an on-time high school diploma is in reference to eighth-graders. Students who had been held back (or otherwise stayed back) prior to the eighth grade are counted as graduating on time as long as they were not also held back between the eighth grade and high school graduation. The on-time high school graduation measure used in this Issue Brief is from student transcripts; all other measures are based on students' self-reports.

[6]These milestones may not describe typical paths; for example, 59 percent of postsecondary graduates fail to complete their credential within the scheduled time frame. However, these milestones are related to persistence factors. Berkner, Cuccaro-Alamin, and McCormick (1996) found that the following factors lowered postsecondary student persistence and attainment: being a high school dropout or GED recipient, delaying enrollment by a year or more, and attending part time.

[7]Unless otherwise noted, all findings reported in this brief are from analyses of NELS:88/2000.

[8]The percentage for Asians is significantly higher than the percentages for all other groups; the percentage for Whites is significantly higher than the percentages for Blacks and Hispanics. Analysis of credentials by level was beyond the scope of this Issue Brief; however, the reader should bear in mind that the differences observed here may include racial/ethnic differences in credential level as well as in the attainment of a credential. For example, among NELS:88/2000 students, 51 percent of Asians obtained a bachelor's degree or higher by 2000, compared to 34 percent of Whites, 17 percent of Blacks, and 15 percent of Hispanics (Ingels et al. 2002).

[9]This analysis examined each milestone independently of whether the student had reached previous milestones. No difference was detected in the percentages of Black and White students who completed high school via a nontraditional means, possibly due to a relatively high standard error for these Black students. In all other cases, Blacks and Hispanics were more likely than their Asian and White counterparts to reach these milestones via a nontraditional means.

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